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RHYTHM
IS OUR
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Jimmie Lunceford
and the Harlem Express

EDDY DETERMEYER

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PREFACE

Once upon a time in Memphis, a bunch of schoolboys started a band. The road they traveled took them from starvation to stardom. In its heyday the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra drew such crowds that occasionally dances had to be canceled, the mass of bodies threatening the integrity of the building. During the swing era, roughly between 1935 and 1945, most of the better bands did that: they provided swing music. Jimmie Lunceford's Harlem Express bounced you into bad health. For many years, it was the best-loved dance band in the South, attracting eight to ten thousand dancers to big tobacco barns that had been turned into makeshift ballrooms.

Superior musicianship, dynamic control, and an irresistible beat were Lunceford's strong selling points, but showmanship was another pillar. The various sections of the orchestra moved in perfect unison to the groove; the trumpeters, when not screeching to the high heavens, would throw their instruments in the air, to catch them on the beat; even the handling of the mutes was strictly choreographed. On its tours, the band brought along the best professional dancers. Lunceford was the man who put the show in black show business. Most of the great swing bands and rhythm-and-blues acts took some inspiration from his Harlem Express.

Jimmie Lunceford was an innovator, introducing the electric guitar and the electric bass to jazz music. Cutting-edge arrangements by Sy Oliver, Eddie Durham, Gerald Wilson, Tadd Dameron, and Billy Moore put the band in the vanguard, where it bridged swing and bebop. The hip Lunceford style left its mark on numerous other bands, both black and white. Swing-era symbol Glenn Miller was one of Lunceford's staunchest admirers, stating, "Duke is great and Basie is remarkable, but Lunceford tops them both." With their impeccable, glamorous appearance, their infectious

rhythms, and their jivey vocals, the musicians became role models for a generation of young African Americans.

Yet for many years the band remained virtually invisible to the white public because the band was constantly on the road to play black dances. Unlike most of the other top bands, the Lunceford orchestra seldom played the big New York hotels with their radio outlets.

Nevertheless, Lunceford's band played an important part in breaking down the color barrier. Not only was Jimmie Lunceford one of the first black leaders to hire white arrangers, a white singer, and white musicians, he also shunned segregated dances. His appearances at white colleges and other venues that up till then had featured white artists exclusively opened the door for other black acts.

Jimmie Lunceford was the first to teach jazz music at any school, and later, after his hit recordings and his successes at the Cotton Club in Harlem had made him a wealthy man, he financed several school bands and sport teams in order to fight juvenile delinquency. When his band really started to make money, he fulfilled an old dream and bought himself an airplane. And when, after just two months, he crashed that one, he replaced it with two new planes, including a state-of-the-art twin-engined Cessna. Shortly before his death he was developing plans to fly his band to Europe, to tour the continent in style—in a Dakota, to be flown by the leader.

Jimmie Lunceford and the Harlem Express brought a sense of glamour, class, and excitement to a people who were still recovering from the Great Depression. It was the kind of band one would spend one's last dollar on. So there's no use waiting: check your coat and join the crowd, because it's time to jump and shout!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Piecing together a puzzle can be a lonely occupation; it is much more fun to do it in the company of friends. I think the first friend to show me that there was a Jimmie Lunceford puzzle was singer and jazz historian Babs Gonzales, who used to cram days and nights with his stories, starting at breakfast and finishing after everybody had gone to sleep. I should have followed him around with a tape recorder. Old Babs would be around forever, I figured. His adventures on the road as assistant band boy with the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra constituted a considerable part of these stories, and after the third or fourth glass of wine he'd invariably cock his head slightly backward, close his eyes, grab my arm, and smile, "Hey Eddy, I know you've got Mr. Lunceford. Put on *For Dancers Only, nigger!*" Little Gonz sure would have enjoyed a book about the Lunceford band.

Over the years Lunceford's name kept popping up in interviews I did with different musicians for various Dutch publications, and gradually I started digging deeper into the man's career and achievements. I realized that the history of his music was more complicated than available books told us. I had amassed about four inches of documents on Lunceford, which I regarded as quite an achievement, when Han Schulte of the Jazz Documentatie Centrum, one of the largest private jazz archives in Europe, sent me a box full of information, including the results of Franz Hoffmann's systematic coverage of the African American press between 1910 and 1950. At that point, there was simply no turning back.

Librarians and historians have become my buddies. They include the respective staffs at the Amsterdam Dutch Jazz Archive, the Universiteitsbibliotheek in Groningen, the Stockholm Svenskt Visarkiv, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the John Hope and Elizabeth Franklin Library at Fisk University in Nashville, the Gaylord Music Library at

Washington University in St. Louis, Indiana University, the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library, the San Antonio Public Library, the White Plains Public Library, the Greenburgh Public Library, the Seaside Museum and Historical Society, the Fulton, Missouri, Historical Society, and *Down Beat* magazine.

Then there are the numerous private researchers and jazz enthusiasts who delved into their personal files. I do not wish to exclude anyone, and certainly not Roel Abels, who was the first one to grasp the significance and scope of this book, Frank Bonitto, who was a fan and a friend of Lunceford's ever since he first heard the band's nightly broadcasts from the Cotton Club, Robert Veen (who not only provided me with useful technical information, but got so carried away that he had his Beau Hunks orchestra study and perform the original Lunceford charts), Carl A. Hällström, Michael Arié, Rainer A. Lotz, Richard Palmer at Jazz Journal International, Donald R. A. Uges and Rogier Smits at the Laboratory for Clinical and Forensic Toxicology and Drug Analysis of Groningen State University, Mark O'Shaughnessy and the staff at BB's in St. Louis, where the last of the original blues trains roam, Ate van Delden, Ky Jennings, Arne Neegaard and Jim Gallert of the Jazz Research Group, Val Don Hickerson, Ernst Bruins, Bertil Lyttkens, who still regrets he missed the second show in Helsingborg, March 6, 1937, the editorial staff at *Orkester Journalen*, Wendy Prins and Lo Reizevoort, who helped me out with the Swedish articles, David Levering Lewis, Hugh Foley, and the gentlemen who desperately tried to mold my rather sad English into more or less readable matter, corrected factual errors (all remaining errors in the book are mine, of course), and added some useful information, Herman te Loo, Kurt Weis, John McDonough, and, last but by no means least, Walter van de Leur.

The musicians and dancers who were willing to share their memories of the Lunceford band and the swing era were invaluable. They include Emerson Able Jr., Rashied Ali, Benny Bailey, Butch Ballard, Art Blakey, John Carter, Arnett Cobb, Honi Coles, Buddy DeFranco, Von Freeman, Joe Houston, Hank Jones, George Kelly, Jackie Kelso, Freddie Kohlman, Milt Larkin, Jim Leigh, Willie Mitchell, Jimmy Oliver, Kathryn Perry Thomas, Bobby Plater, Eddie Randle Jr., Red Richards, James Flash Riley, Little Jimmy Scott, Horace Silver, Sun Ra, Sir Charles Thompson, Earle Warren, Frank Wess, Gerald Wiggins, and Don Wilkerson.

I was able to track down Jimmie Lunceford's closest living relative, his

nephew Al, who saw his uncle just once, but was able to provide me with some information on the family.

When Chris Hebert of the University of Michigan Press saw my book proposal, his email reaction read, “I like the looks of this very much,” and he, Lewis Porter, and the rest of the staff at the University of Michigan have been supportive ever since.

Finally, I dedicate *Rhythm Is Our Business* to the musicians who were members of the great Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, some for one or two nights, others for six years, and whom I had the pleasure of interviewing. They are, in order of appearance: Jonah Jones, Gerald Wilson, Snooky Young, Truck Parham, Dave Bartholomew, Russell Jacquet, Benny Waters, Jerome Richardson, Connie Johnson, Russell Green, Al Cobbs, Al Grey, Joe Wilder, Billy Mitchell, and Aaron Bell.

The streamlined rhythms of the Harlem Express may have ceased to inspire and move a dancing nation, but the memory lingers on.